

What is “Dialectic” and Why Care?

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Amongst the left in general there is a type of intellectual disease, a plague of the mind, called “dialectics”. This disease is primarily an ailment suffered by “qualified” intellectuals in the Marxist and post-Marxist tradition, and the hordes of pseudo-intellectuals that regurgitate old as well as popular “progressive” theories in an attempt to hide their ideologies behind a veneer of philosophical complexity and scientific account. Dialectics has long been a word that has been thrown around to beat the “ignorant” over the head, used and abused by invoking the unchallengeable pillar of Marxist “scientific” thought, that which any Marx inspired leftist quickly snaps to attention and salutes with veneration and fervor, for what is Marxism other than a name for that almighty science, *materialist dialectics*, that gave us the great theory of Capital?

Why do Marxists make such a fuss about understanding it and applying it? Why do so many people on the left invoke it as a type of argument ender by claiming *you* simply don’t think dialectically and deserve no place in discussion until you do? Why is it that whenever you ask someone to define dialectics they are incapable of giving you a concept that shows why dialectics is necessary at all? Does dialectics really have any importance for leftist revolutionary, and perhaps even general scientific theory? Before that is answered, it must be cleared up what *dialectics*, the application of dialectical method, is. There is in the modern day a great misunderstanding of this term, it has become ironically obfuscated and mystified by attempts that originally intended to rescue the term from what Marx called it’s mystification at Hegel’s hands. *So, what is dialectics?*

Dialectics, many people on the internet and in books will tell you, is the process from which a *thesis* faced by its *antithesis* is transformed into a *synthesis*. Dialectics, you are told, is the *unity of opposites*. Dialectics, you are told, is the way reality *really* works, but there is a problem with all of these conceptions that needs to be addressed. Supposing that dialectics is really just these doctrines, what does this tell you about their necessity in understanding Marx’s theory of humans and their societies? What does dialectics tell us that is so direly necessary to have a proper scientific understanding of reality? If dialectics is nothing but these formulaic and basic descriptive conceptions, there seems nothing useful about it and it deserves to be put in the dustbin of history. Nonetheless, while dialectics may be a term that has become a joke to anyone with a penetrating analytic eye, there is a conception of dialectics that is of use if given a chance, and uncovering its concept is nothing but a simple return to Hegel himself to explain it, and then one shall see the clarity of Marx’s own position and use of this peculiar logic. First, however, some popular myths about what dialectics is must be brought up if only to show the peculiar state of this “logic”, a state of a deathly loss of vitality and unclear necessity.

The first myth of the dialectic that anyone generally encounters is the myth of the *Thesis – Antithesis – Synthesis* triad which is the most generally popular conception of dialectics outside of philosophical scholarship focusing on Marx or Hegel. Under this conception of dialectics one is told that the method of Hegel and Marx was to simply begin with a position, a *thesis*, then find and move on to the *antithesis*, its opposite, and finally to find the *synthesis* of both which is the truer concept or position which brings both together in harmony. The problem with this conception of dialectics is not only that it doesn’t make sense regarding Hegel or Marx, but also that it really is useless for thinking through

anything except for liberal centrist idealist answers. Not only does this have no universal applicability, you can't reasonably apply this to everything, so it does not function well as a logical form, but it also fails to show why it's necessary. Let us see a simple example: light (thesis) and dark (antithesis) are opposites, what is their synthesis? Gray? What does this mean? Nothing. Heterosexual (thesis) and homosexual (antithesis) synthesize to... bisexual? Is this useful for anything? Well, when it comes to politics, it is useful to centrists! Capitalism (thesis) and socialism (antithesis) synthesize in the much more preferable synthesis of social democracy. Not capitalism or socialism, but capitalism *and* socialism! How great it is, one must say, that ultimate truth and reality is the centrist liberal dogma that the good answer to everything is a little bit of A and a little bit of B!

Regarding Hegel, it *seems* as if this formula fits the Being-Nothing-Becoming dialectic, however, this is nonsense. Becoming is not a synthesis of Being and Nothing. Becoming includes within it Being and Nothing but is itself more than the two concepts, a sublation. *Sublations* are not syntheses that merely take a little bit of A and a little bit of B and mix them together. *Sublations* preserve the contradiction, the antithetical terms, and are themselves new terms that are more than the terms they contain. It is also *not* the case that Hegel came upon this triad of Being by starting with Being, finding its opposite, and then just putting the two concepts together in a third concept like one mixes vanilla and chocolate ice cream and calls that "vanillate"; no new flavor has been made by bringing those two flavors together, it's just a mix. What Hegel actually does in this basic dialectic shall be shown later.

Turning away from the basic general misunderstanding of dialectics, let us take for example Trotsky's *The ABC of Materialist Dialectics*, one commonly suggested introduction to dialectics for Marxists. Trotsky begins his explanation with the trite critique of the falsehood of formal logic by showing that $A=A$ is just an ideal abstraction, and that in *material reality* A in fact *does not* equal A because things are always changing. If you are philosophically not well read, and not prone to thinking through things, this seems like a pretty obvious criticism of formal logic, but it is a very weak criticism. The reason this criticism fails is this: an apple is still an apple even if a couple of molecules rotted away on the ride from the grocery market to your home. The concept of the apple here is an abstraction, hence abstract thinking with general ideas work just fine for its practical purposes. When we talk in regular language we do not seek to capture in the words we use the complete material description of an object, so his criticism of formal logic failing to capture the change of objects doesn't matter.

In the *ABC of Materialist Dialectics* Trotsky invokes the famous "laws of dialectics" formulated by Engels in his *Dialectics of Nature*. What Trotsky's analysis of dialectics ultimately devolves to is this: that dialectics is merely the name of the acknowledgement that material reality is always becoming something else, and that abstract signifiers and concepts do not capture the complete detail of this becoming, i.e. reality changes and our ideas must change with it. This doctrine of endless change, becoming, of reality seems like a good thing to know, but Trotsky does not present it in a way that really proves the necessity of believing it. Trotsky's criticism of formal mathematical logic is a weak attempt to bolster a reputation for his own useless formulation of the logic he calls *materialist dialectics*. By attacking the universal abstract character of formal logic Trotsky thought he was making an argument for his own logic, but he failed to attack formal logic in a way that proved its uselessness and unreality. Ironically, Trotsky's treatment of dialectics suffers from what he himself critiques in formal logic's rigidity: he freezes dialectics, kills its evolutionary spirit, by invoking axioms and laws of dialectics as a formula to input information into, process, and spit out. The real value of *The ABC of Materialist Dialectics* is Trotsky's points on the importance of historical context to understand anything, particularly the historical political and economic context of society. This understanding is one that does happen to be a product of dialectical thinking, but contextualism and historicism is *not* dialectics itself.

Now, Engels' *Dialectics of Nature* was mentioned above, so let us look at the famous "Laws of dialectics" that Trotsky invoked. Engels was Marx's right hand man, and a brilliant analyst, but philosophy, particularly dialectical philosophy, was not his strength. Marx never talked about any laws

of dialectics, nor did Hegel, who in fact in the very preface to his first major work, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, denied the very possibility of formulating what his method was.

The first law of dialectics according to Engels is the law of *the transformation of quantity into quality*. That quantitative changes led to qualitative changes was an observation not just in dialectical thinking and formal thinking, but also from simple empirical experience of the human species regarding certain phenomena. Things get hot and they burn, they get cold and they freeze and become brittle; an atom of water is not wet, but a couple billion are. An uprising in a city is a riot, and an uprising all over a state is a political revolution. Engels, inspired by Hegel's own {quantity-quality}-Measure dialectic, made a universalization of the dialectic relation between quantity and quality. However, what use does this law have for thinking other than the recognition that little things and activities piling up eventually lead to expected and unexpected changes in the natural and social sphere? If one were an observer of phenomena armed with this doctrine, what could one reason to? Not much.

What about the second law, the law of *the unity and conflict of opposites*? This certainly arises as an understanding *through* dialectics, but it is *not* dialectics itself. The fact that being and nothing are innately connected is an elucidating piece of information to help understand how concepts function, and the fact that the working class and the capitalist class is innately connected is also a very elucidating piece of information that is vital to understanding why capitalism seems to be an unending conflict between rich and poor trying to use the state to get what they want at the clear expense of the other. As a universal law of how to properly understand things, this doesn't help much. Indeed, one has to do a bit more analysis to show someone why it matters that workers cannot exist without capitalists nor capitalists without workers. One can see the conflict of the unity, but can one see a solution by just knowing this? The eastern mystical religions have this understanding of the unity of opposites as well: good and evil, pleasure and pain, happiness and suffering; if you have one, you have the other. So what? Once again, if capitalist and worker exist only with and through their relation to each other, what can be seriously deduced from this? It's the way the world may be, but then so what?

Finally there is the law of the *negation of the negation*, a phrase that Hegel himself would be unsatisfied by with regards to his very unique concept of *sublation*. This final law of dialectics affords no more an understanding to anyone looking from the outside as to why dialectics matters at all. As the law states, any negation provides the ground for its own negation, or as Trotsky simply put it more concisely: material reality is always changing, always negating itself into something else. What use is the knowledge of these mystical metaphysical laws? Quantitative changes lead to qualitative changes; opposites are inherently tied together; all things negate themselves by their very nature. Putting the three laws together no useful theory of logic can be put together to analyze anything of interest. Why should anyone care about dialectics if this is all it is?

So far one can see that *dialectics* just seems to be an ensemble of synthesized propositions basically restating something that is a very basic set of two philosophical axioms and good empirical observation: *everything changes all the time, and there is an inescapable relation of causality between everything at some level, the level of material existence and activity being the final explanation as to why anything is the way it is*. So why invoke *dialectics*? Why bother with all the jargon and explanation that it necessitates if all it is are these two good scientific axioms of material reality? Because Marx invoked dialectics. Marx claimed that it was a key method to having developed his groundbreaking theory of Capital. Whatever dialectics is, you know it has to be something *really, really good* to think with. If Marx could produce *Capital* through the method of dialectics, a theory so groundbreaking we're still thinking through it 150 years later because it captured so well the core functioning and problem of capitalism, then *you understanding dialectics* is imperative to keep the project of communism alive and going successfully into the future. By invoking *dialectics*, many academic and nonacademic (pseudo)intellectuals are calling upon the historical might of Marx's scientific stature in order to legitimate their theoretical blabbering as science. The jargon of dialectical analysis hides flawed ideas behind walls of obscurity.

It is because of the prestige that dialectics has through Marx that others insist on and continue to invoke dialectics. When people wish to think themselves as being groundbreaking theorists, and to appear to the general population of the Marxist leaning left as true red-blooded communists, they proclaim to have discovered some as yet unknown *dialectical contradiction* that explains a problem Marx had either not analyzed or not foreseen. The general left tends to consider itself more intellectual, more enlightened, and generally more *progressive* than any other would be intellectual of the Right or the so-called liberal left. This general belief of the left in its natural intellectual superiority causes it to sustain delusions of its own intellectual capacities and thus you get the modern phenomenon of teenagers and twenty year olds spouting theoretical verbiage left and right, sure of themselves in making proclamations that upon analysis not even they understand. One needs only to browse the self-proclaimed left of the internet and universities to see the language of the pseudointellectual left in action. People claiming such absurdities of the likes of there being a dialectical contradiction between capital and non-heteronormative sexualities (whatever they think that means, it definitely isn't dialectical), claiming that biology is just a bourgeois invention to try to justify sexism /racism/ heteronormativity/ gender /ablism etc. through undialectical formal logic. Facticity is not factual if it doesn't conform to our perceptions, and since *we* think and speak of things dialectically, and dialectics is the way the world works, we are the only ones who can properly interpret scientific truth.

This leaning to claim that anything we believe is true because it is dialectical, and that anything we don't like is false because it is undialectical, is simply a basic religious ideology, and it's not the case that this is simply a modern phenomenon. Dialectics is a religious doctrine of the left since the day Marx himself died without ever writing his short treatise on dialectics, but rest assured that even if he had it would still be little other than a doctrine to worship for anyone other than intellectuals. As one can see, Engels, Trotsky, Stalin, Mao, etc. all had similar conceptions of dialectics as a formulaic approach to the world based on metaphysical beliefs about the structure of the world. Dialectics and its laws are true because the world is dialectical, and since the world is dialectical the only way to think true thoughts about the world is through dialectics. The best that is done to substantiate these dogmas is weak circular reference back to the laws of dialectics, or empirical interpretations assuming said laws. Phrases such as, "Dialectics is the logic of change", "The world is a unity of contradictions", etc. all have a nice and neat yet utterly vague philosophical depth. In the USSR the ideology of dialectics rose the status of state doctrinal religion in the form of Diamat, with which all aspects of thinking were judged as either proletarian science or bourgeois science and the Soviet world reaped the likes of Lysenkoism as its reward.

If there is a conception of dialectics that is useful, you likely are still wondering what dialectics is and why it matters. The best that most will ever tell you is that you will understand it only once you've seen it in action enough. That's what I was told when I first began the journey to know what it is. So far I have criticized the common ideas which fail to show anyone why they should care about this arcane theory of dialectics. So, why should you care about dialectics? What *is* dialectics if it is none of the above? It's time to pull back the curtain of dogma and mysticism, the great sin that Marxists committed against the teachings of their holy father, Marx, and thus betrayed the spirit of his work and replaced a great science with religion. Up to now we have talked about dialectics, but perhaps it may be best to clarify all of this with a slight change in term. Dialectics is merely the application of dialectical method, so I shall talk about dialectic as such by showing a couple examples of what a *dialectic* looks like.

Dialectic is not a formula. The products of dialectics cannot be given before dialectical treatment of a subject matter itself is gone through. Dialectic is not a set of presupposed or assumed axiomatic laws about reality or thought. Dialectic is literally what it says: sustained analytic dialogue within a subject; dialogue of a peculiar kind for it is not a dialogue between persons. To state it more clearly: dialectic is the relentless analysis and critique of concepts only according to the content of the concepts themselves in a long running internal dialogue in the content of the concept. This critique, however, is not completely negative. Dialectic is not skepticism trying to tear down the world and show it as ultimately meaningless, it is skepticism tearing down what cannot stand on its own and building up

from what is left to salvage until it too falls and leaves one more broken piece of truth to rebuild from. The relentless analysis of concepts *happens* to show that no concept has meaning on its own, its content includes its *other*, its dialectical opposite. This unity of opposites is not a law of dialectic itself, it is a provable result of dialectic carried out. Dialectic *happens* to show that all concepts will break down under relentless analysis and find themselves groundless in-themselves, finding the resolution of their failures in other concepts which themselves will eventually fall. The *negation of the negation* happens to be true for every concept you can conceive from apples to gender. All ideas are incapable of standing on their own and either dissolve in skepticism or find themselves as a specific rule to another concept. The applicability of dialectic is universal. Any and all concepts of any kind and of anything can be analyzed with it.

Hegel's dialectic was the analysis of pure concepts, his Logic focusing on ultimately the analysis of what a proper conception of an absolute, a completely self-determining and unbounded being, must be. This analysis also shows along the way the very way *objective* thought works, the way thinking occurs not inside our heads, but in society. Here is an example of what dialectic looks like in Hegel:

We begin with the concept of Being as an absolute. Being as a concept has no content; the content of being *is* Nothing. Since Nothing is the content which gives being its meaning, Nothing is now considered the absolute. If Nothing *is* not, then nothing is depending in Being for its conceptual content. Being finds itself *Becoming* Nothing, and Nothing *Becoming* Being. Becoming is now considered as the absolute because it is the concept which is grounding and mediating these two in their transition into each other. Becoming is the higher concept which contains what appeared to be a logical contradiction of two opposite concepts being each other's content, i.e. Becoming is the *sublation* of Being and Nothing, the concept which contains them and is itself *more* than they are yet maintains Being and Nothing as its real content. This simple analysis is a *dialectical* analysis carried out. This *process* of analysis is dialectics. Being and Nothing are dialectically related because each necessarily contains the other in their own content, just as capitalist and worker contain each other in the content of their concept.

Marx's dialectic is far less ambitious than Hegel's, but aimed at far more practical concerns. Marx's dialectic is the dialectic of concepts and material existence. Marx thus aims at understanding how ideas arise out of material activity and relation, and it is this understanding which justifies the Marxist doxa that "*In the final analysis the material conditions are determinant*"; in an ideally complete analysis of social reality we would see that all our concepts and ideas arise from our initially unconscious activities and relations with each other and the world. Capital, for example, arises from the material activity of commodity exchange. Capital's genesis is commodity exchange where humans unconsciously bring to existence the concept of value as abstract necessary labor time whether they are conscious of it or not. Value is where capital truly originates, and it is the logic of value as exchange value, the necessary development of this *objective* idea which exists outside our minds, which leads to the development of money and the eventual development of finance, rent, and industrial capital, concepts which following their own internal logic of development necessarily erect the form of social life known as capitalism. The great scientific achievement of Marx was the discovery of the "genetic" origin of capital for this knowledge is the necessary basis for putting forth a truly anti-capitalist concept of society. Just as the example of Becoming was made for Hegel to show the dialectical process, so too can value be shown to develop. The development of *value* as a concept is too much to give a proper and worthy analysis in this short article, and it must be said that it is most impressive in its entirety. *Capital* is where this concept is fully unfolded in its highest detail.

Materialist dialectics is the search for basic concepts of material relations which are "genetic" in that they can be shown to be the real phenomena that are the source of other phenomena that develop from complications of the genetic concept/relation. Just as DNA is known as the source of complex biological life, which allowed the real beginning of biology as science, the commodity as the source of capitalist relations allows us as leftists to begin a real anticapitalist program for we know the science of real capitalist economics. The real root of any real social problem can be found through a proper and

intense dialectical analysis, from sexism, gender, etc. Just as Being contained Nothing within itself, capitalism contains communism within itself as a possibility. Some would say that even now we have yet to properly identify the real concept of communism, and if communism must be a movement of and for the masses conscious of themselves and their society, then dialectical thinking may find its use in offering the proper vision of the future.

So why should you care about dialectics? You should care because you want to be a true radical. Because to change the world you need to know the real ultimate source of the problems you wish to cure. Because to think dialectically is the aim to think true concepts that do not simply describe, but explain why something in the world is what it is.